

# Exploring the Riviera's great diving opportunities

ALWAYS keen to try out new experiences, *Let's Go Riviera's* **Peter Hawkins** donned a wetsuit and scuba gear for the first time and took the plunge into the clear blue waters of the Côte d'Azur where he learned a new sign language and came face-to-face with curious fish, all under the guiding hand of British diving instructor Alex Diamond from Antibes

JUST how friendly are fish?

We are a few metres below the surface on my first dive and they seem to be as curious about me as I am about them. I had expectations of catching the odd glimpse of retreating shoals disappearing off into the darkness but they seem quite happy swimming around in front of me.

I too am happy floating about on a 'try dive' with my instructor Alex Diamond. He's got my back, quite literally – he is controlling my ascent and descent by adjusting the buoyancy levels on my jacket.

My main job is to remember to breathe through my mouth.

I arrived as a complete novice for the dive in Antibes. Through Alex's pre-arranged deals I was kitted out at the Easy Dive centre at Port Gallice, Cap d'Antibes with an appropriate wetsuit, two in

fact (as the water is still quite cool), tanks, a buoyancy control device (BCD), regulator and flippers. We board the Easy Dive boat which heads out to an area called *La Formigue* in the gulf of Juan which is roughly halfway between Cap d'Antibes and the Isle de Lérins. In this region - near a lighthouse – there are dives suiting all levels of ability. On the way Alex explains what will happen on the dive and tries to gauge how I will react once underwater. "So, you would be quite comfortable to have your head under the water suddenly looking down 30 feet over rocks?" he asks. I replied I liked the flying sensation – which is odd given that I hate flying.

## Basics

We go over the basics of the equipment – air-supply, regulator, mask. Alex checks that everything fits and that I can breathe through the mouth piece. We go over divers' sign language; a thumbs up indicates you want to head to the surface rather than OK.

To signify you are fine you need to put your thumb and index finger together and curl your fingers around as if you are trying to cast a rabbit shadow puppet.

If you are not feeling so great you waggle your hand from side to side and then indicate what is wrong.

Those around me are more experienced divers. I can tell this because when we left the centre they were casually



Photos: Diamond Diving

**BUOYANCY:** *Let's Go Riviera's* Peter Hawkins plunges to new depths near Antibes with his first dive under the guiding hand of English diving instructor Alex Diamond

dressed civilians and a 15 minute boat ride later they are fully kitted-out divers rolling backwards off the side of the boat.

I declined the invitation to try the same. For my first go I thought I should approach this gently.

I was aware that if I rolled backwards off a boat in diving gear I might instinctively breathe through my nose, panic and cause problems. Best try it the easy way first.

Alex got in first and I followed without kit.

He helped me into the buoyancy

control device which is there to secure the air-supply and stop you from sinking to the bottom or staying glued to the surface.

## Visibility

We swim out from the boat, heads in the water just looking down. Unfortunately the wind was whipping up the sea slightly and the visibility was not brilliant.

After a short period Alex signals to see if I'm good to dive – I am.

He adjusts my BCD and we gradually drop beneath the surface.

During the try drive your instructor stays in physical contact with you the entire time – which is good for several reasons.

One is simply that you have no idea where you are going. By steering me and pointing Alex was able to show some of the species of fish and plants he had talked about on the way over.

This was helpful because you cannot get a running commentary when you are under water. We were under the surface for around 20 minutes, dropping to a depth of six metres. While this

may not sound deep it was fine for a first go.

During this time I got used to the sensation of being in waves, rather than on them – a motion that disappears the deeper you dive. I also got the hang of pinching my nose to equalise the pressure while remembering to breathe at the same time.

## Fish

Despite the relatively overcast day on the Riviera there is still plenty to see. Pairs of Sars, silver

fish with two distinct black bands idly drift around.

It could be my imagination but I swear they were looking at me quizzically – then again, that might just be how fish look normally.

There were also Girelle – tiny fish that could be encouraged to come to you by flicking plants to float food particles in the water.

One thing thankfully lacking was any sign of a shark, despite the best effort of colleagues to persuade me of their abundance in the waters around Antibes.

We surface and I climb back

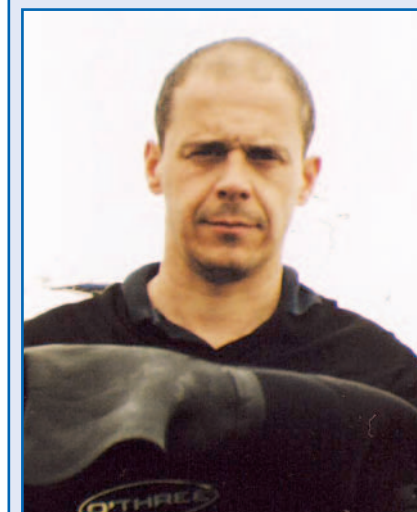
**PROFESSIONAL** diver Alex Diamond is one of the few instructors qualified to teach both the international PADI course as well as the appropriate French diving qualifications.

He is gearing up for his second season working on the Côte d'Azur with his company Diamond Diving which offers teaching courses, diving holidays and specialist outings.

Dives take place from Nice, Antibes, Saint Raphaël, Sainte Maxime and La Londe.

Packages range from a 'try dive' at €45 to an entry-level PADI course and diving holiday.

The company works mostly with English-speakers either visiting or living in the area. Dive packages can be booked throughout the season or complete holidays organised in advance, including accommodation booking, and different dives for all skill levels along the south coast.



**INSTRUCTOR:** Diver Alex Diamond

## Wrecks to visit along the Riviera



Photo: Diamond Diving

THESE DIVES ARE FOR THE MORE EXPERIENCED BUT IF YOU HAVE THE QUALIFICATIONS THERE ARE PLENTY OF SITES TO DIVE ALONG THE COAST.

## THE RUBIS

The Rubis was a Saphir class mine-laying submarine which served in the French Navy and Free French Navy during the Second World War. At the time of the French surrender on June 22, 1940, she was in port in the United Kingdom, and joined the Free French Forces. She laid mines off the coast of Norway and the Bay of Biscay, sinking many vessels. A class of French nuclear submarine is named after her.

Launched in 1931 she became a training ship after the war and was scuttled in 1958 to provide a target for training exercises. She lies upright at a depth of 40 metres, off Cap Camarat near Sainte Maxime and is still relatively intact.



Photo: Wikipedia commons

**MINE LAYER:** The Rubis in action



Photo: Mark Fyvie www.fyvie.net

**ADVENTURE:** Divers explore the almost intact wreck of the Rubis, former French Navy mine-layer pressed into service with the Royal Navy in WWII

## THE VILLAGE

UNDER the waters of Golfe Juan is a discarded Disney village, which was built for a film that was never completed.

Although mostly ruins, it is gradually being brought up and restored by local divers who hope to return it to its former glory. It is situated at a depth of 10-15 metres in what amounts to an underwater valley. With a little imagination one can envisage its former glory which incorporated a Roman amphitheatre, fort, and numerous churches and bridges.

## LE DONATOR

THIS 78 metre long cargo vessel sunk just off Porquerolles Island near La Londe in November 1945 after hitting one of the mines that littered the sea after WWII.

She now lies on a flat sandy bottom at 48 metres.

Most of the wreck is still recognisable and easily explored. Because of the depth and currents this is a challenging dive and divers should have experience in doing compulsory decompression stops.

## AEROPLANE

IN VILLEFRANCHE Bay you can either dive along the shallow reef to the east, while more experienced divers can check out a number of drops including the wreck of an aeroplane.

## Join the hunt for buried treasure along the Var coast

AN UNDERWATER hunt for €10,000 of treasure has begun along the Var.

The diving association *Objectif Atlantide* has launched the challenge with its president Daniel Méouchy describing it as 'the greatest event of scuba diving of all time.'

To find the treasure divers need to collect a series of clues hidden at dive sites in Toulon, Six-Fours, Sanary and Marseille. The clues, small red clay plates, have regional symbols on one side and a serial number on the other.

Players register to take part in the treasure hunt on [www.letresor.net](http://www.letresor.net) and enter the numbers they find as they discover them.

In total there are 14 clues, shrimps (symbol of the Var), sardines (symbol of Marseille), sole, sea bream, tuna, sharks, jelly fish, bars, lobsters, crabs and octopuses. Divers will be able to exchange some of the clues online. On July 18 all those who have registered the 14 clues will receive a map to find the treasure. The first person to find the treasure can collect €7,000 or if it is found by a diving group €10,000. From then on people will be able to win eight lots of €500 and there is a prize fund of €3,500 for young people between 14 and 24 years old.



Photo: Yann Choccoliff

**CLUES:** Small plaques can be found at different sites

## A glorious wealth of life below the Mediterranean waves



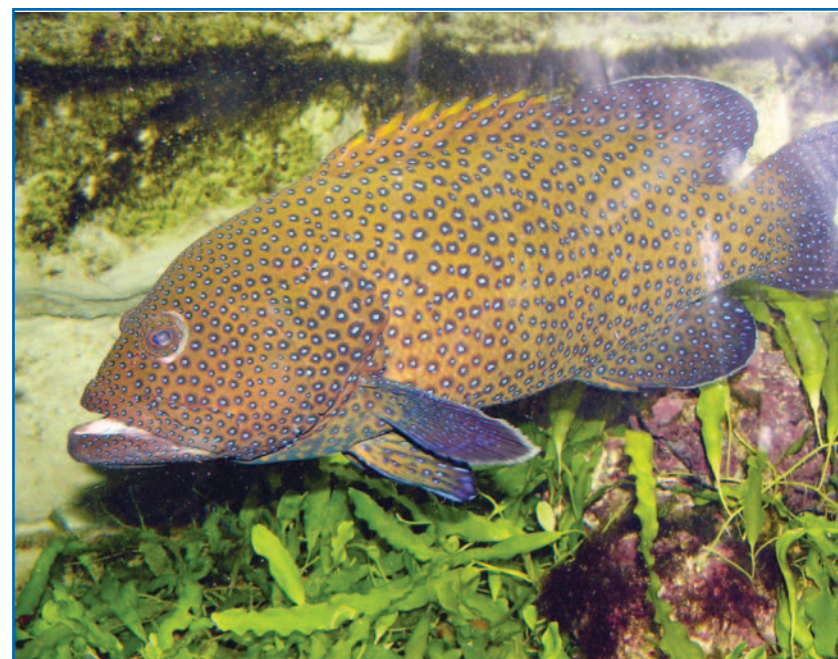
**SAFETY IN NUMBERS:** A glittering shoal of barracuda



**PLANT LIFE:** Purple fans give colour to the sea bed



**LUNCH:** A lobster stays close to safety point



**GROUPE:** Species is returning to the region following preservation efforts